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REMARKS OF SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD (D., MONTANA)

BEFORE THE SENATE

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEDICATION OF THE OLD CHAMBER

UNITED STATES CAPITOL

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 16, 1976, 4:00 P. M.

In 1859, sixty-four Senators moved from this room into the present Senate chamber. Today, we have retraced their steps not, I hope, in retrogression, but for the purposes of enlarging our perception of the Senate and its place in the continuity of the United States.

Alexis de Toqueville visited in this chamber nearly 150 years ago. He observed that it "contains within a small space a large proportion of the celebrated men of America. Scarcely an individual is to be seen in it who has not had an active and illustrious career: the Senate is composed of eloquent advocates, distinguished generals, wise magistrates, and statesmen of note whose arguments would do honor to the most remarkable parliamentary debates of Europe."

Since then, to hear some tell it, it has been all downhill.

As we meet in this unusual but Constitutional session of the Senate, it is appropriate to comment on developments since the time of de Toqueville's observation. Historians refer to the Senate of the days of which he spoke as being in a "Golden Age." For the forty years prior to the Civil War the Senate floor was the scene of great national debates.

That is not surprising since there was really no other place to hold them. The Executive Branch was not suited to the purpose. With a membership which by 1850, stood at 232, the House of Representatives was already too large to permit exhaustive discussions of major issues. By contrast, Senators numbered 46 at the period's beginning and only 64 at its end. In the circumstances, the Senate served as the principal political forum for a nation which sensed the gathering storms of division.

The Senate was well-suited to the purpose. For most of the period, each section--North, South, and West--had roughly equal representation. Similarly, philosophical and legislative competence were well distributed.

The small size of the Senate permitted not only prolonged debate but also the flourishing of the sheer force of personality and intellectual acumen. Crises arose one after another and members took them on one at a time. Clay, Calhoun and Webster each abandoned hopes for the Presidency in their determined efforts to persuade their colleagues to save the Union in peace. John F. Kennedy drew profiles of the courage of these Senators, along with others, who had placed national interests above that of section or class.

The Senate's capacity to pause and to ponder, made it a principal force for compromise during these critical years. In turn, the process of compromise held back the germination of the seeds of disunion which by the eighteen-twenties, had already been sown in the nation. If the Civil War had been preventable, I am persuaded that the Senate would have prevented it. As it was, by delaying for four decades the bitter harvest of dissension, the Senate became a principal factor in permitting the building of a sufficient strength into the bonds of unity to withstand the immense tragedy which closed in on the nation after 1860.

Looking around this room, it is obvious that the Senate has lost some of its elegance over the past century and a quarter. One might say that the peacock plumage has been plucked not only from the nest but from its occupants. It does not follow, however, that the Senate has otherwise changed a great deal. We are drawn--as happened with our predecessors--from the vast and continuing stream of American humanity. We are here, partly by choice, partly by fortune and, partly, by only God knows why. What moved Senators yesterday still moves Senators today. We have the individual and collective strength of our predecessors and, I might add, their weaknesses. We are not all ten-feet tall nor were they. We act within the circumference of our fears no less than our courage, our foibles as well as our strengths. Our concerns and our efforts in the Senate, as were theirs, are in the context of advancing the welfare of the people whom we represent, safeguarding the well-being of our respective states and protecting the present and the future of this nation, a nation which belongs--as does this room--not to one of us or to one generation but to all of us and to all generations.

If there are basic differences between the Senate of the eighteen fifties and the Senate of the nineteen seventies, they have to do with the changes as between then and now in the nation and world. We function against a vastly different backdrop. The storms that beat around us reach a towering complexity. The uncertainties seem greater and more perplexing. Yet, the decisions which are made by the Senate, in concert with the President and the House of Representatives must be in the same context as in an earlier and simpler time. They must sustain the enduring promise of America--the promise to all of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They must hew to the

conviction that "government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

The significance of this ceremony today, it seems to me, is to remind us that in a Senate of immense and still unfolding significance to the nation, as individual members, each of us can only play a brief and limited role. It is to remind us that the Senate's responsibilities go on, even though the faces and, yes, even the rooms in which they gather fade into history. With the nation, the Senate has come a long way and, still, there is a long, long way to go.